

Smith River, tribe reach agreement on fire protection

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After a lengthy negotiation, the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation and Smith River Fire Protection District have worked out an agreement which will ensure the continuation of fire protection and emergency medical services on tribal lands in north county, including the Lucky 7 Casino.

On April 24, the existing contract between the nation and SRFPD expired. With negotiations stalled, citizens and lands were going unprotected. But, in an April 30 Facebook post, Tolowa Dee-ni' announced a new intergovernmental agreement had been reached with SRFPD.

"This agreement ensures that basic life support and wildland and structural fire services will continue to be provided to the Nation's citizens and visitors to Tribal Trust lands," read the statement.

Previously, fire protection and emergency medical services for tribal lands had been contracted by SRFPD in exchange for annual payments of about \$6,500, in lieu of property taxes, which tribal lands are not subject to.

Geoff Antill, project coordinator at SRFPD, said the previous "informal" agreement subjected fire volunteers to increased liability when operating on tribal lands. Additionally, the cost of fire and medical services is

greater than what Tolowa Dee-ni' had been paying.

Negotiations for a new agreement began after the SRFPD put in a request for payment to Tolowa Dee-ni' nation last spring, including an annual \$150,000 payment, which was "over 20 times previous year's payments," according to a March 5 press release by Tolowa Dee-ni'.

In the release, Tolowa Dee-ni' said the request included additional expenses also, such as \$250,000 to be used for the renovation of the former Ray's Food Place building in Smith River, which is the proposed new headquarters for SRFPD. According to Tolowa Dee-ni', the fire department was subjecting the nation to a new methodology for calculating fire protection costs, which was "patently unfair."

Antill said SRFPD never asked for funds for the purpose of renovating the proposed headquarters.

"Not exactly sure where that came from," said Antill. "So much stuff came up on Facebook and a lot of it was just poorly informed. That was one of the things that got tossed around on Facebook."

Antill said the district is financially stable and will proceed with renovations of the former grocery store with, or without, support from Tolowa Dee-ni' nation. Nevertheless, he said SRFPD may ask the nation for support with the project in the future. He declined comment on the financial terms of the new agreement, and Tolowa Dee-ni' nation could not be reached for comment for this story.